

C. Overview of Risk Communication in the Commonwealth

The local boards of health perform their responsibilities within the broader context of state government and other public and private entities, described in this section.

1. Overview of MDPH's Center for Emergency Preparedness

In response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent anthrax incidents, Congress and the President authorized funding to State and local health departments to enhance bioterrorism preparedness. MDPH submitted proposals to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for funding for this purpose, which were approved in 2002. The scope of this funding (in the form of cooperative agreements) is broad, ranging from the development of readiness assessments and hospital preparedness plans, to upgrading infectious disease surveillance and investigation, to expanding laboratory and communications capacity.

To enhance coordination of these efforts, MDPH established the Center for Emergency Preparedness (CEP) in the fall of 2003. The CEP worked with local officials and organizational development specialists to establish 15 regional public health preparedness coalitions and is in the process of filling several core positions within the CEP. The CEP's role within MDPH is to act as the single point of contact, centralizing all of MDPH's emergency preparedness activities. Many of the staff positions within the CEP function as liaisons to other state departments. A number of CEP staff are assigned to MDPH Bureaus/Centers with funding from HRSA and/or CDC cooperative agreements.

The CEP has already begun to take a more active role in: leading MDPH in the preparation and completion of the HRSA and CDC cooperative agreement objectives; preparation of state-wide emergency preparedness training activities; developing MDPH emergency preparedness policy statements; and developing/enhancing long-range plans for emergency preparedness and response in the Commonwealth.

2. The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA)

The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) is the Massachusetts agency responsible for coordination of Federal, State, local, voluntary and private resources during disasters and emergencies.

MEMA has defined four levels of emergency, presented below:

Level 1: Day-to-Day Emergency: Local response capability can handle the situation. No assistance is required. Situation is being monitored by the State.

Level 2: Minor Emergency: Situation intensifies. Some state assistance may be required. The Executive Office of Public Safety (EOPS) and the Governor's Office are notified.

Level 3: Major Emergency: Local response capabilities are inadequate. Situation requires State response assistance and possible Federal assistance. State Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is activated. The Governor declares a State of Emergency.

Level 4: Catastrophic Emergency: Widespread threats to public safety exist. Large-scale State and Federal response and recovery assistance is required.¹

Local officials have primary responsibility for responding to crises at the local level. Depending upon the scale and severity of an emergency, however, MEMA may be activated to serve a coordinating role on behalf of the Commonwealth. If an emergency requires State involvement, MEMA activates the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) in Framingham. The SEOC is staffed with MEMA personnel and members of a variety of State, Federal and volunteer agencies, including MDPH. Together, these cooperating agencies are known as the Massachusetts Emergency Management Team (MEMT). MDPH plays an integral role as a member of the MEMT. The MEMT capabilities are far-reaching, ranging from shelter management to transportation to equipment to communications.

3. The Health Alert Network (HAN)

The HAN is a tool designed for bi-directional communication among public health, law enforcement, public safety, environmental health, health care professionals and other partners in the Commonwealth. The HAN is a secure, password-protected web platform. The HAN is in its pilot stage, during which MDPH is collaborating with partner agencies to finalize and document the system's protocols.

Currently, in addition to MDPH staff, the HAN contains contact information for approximately 1,500 professionals, including representatives from agencies and organizations such as:

- ✓ MEMA
- ✓ MA Information Technology Division
- ✓ Local Emergency Management authorities
- ✓ Massachusetts Governor's Office
- ✓ Executive Office of Public Safety
- ✓ Anti-Terrorism Advisory Council
- ✓ Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency
- ✓ Massachusetts Attorney General's Office
- ✓ Department of Food and Agriculture
- ✓ Department of Public Health
- ✓ Department of Fire Services
- ✓ Hospitals
- ✓ Red Cross
- ✓ Local Boards of Health
- ✓ Mass League of Community Health Centers
- ✓ Massachusetts Hospitals Association
- ✓ Mass Medical Society
- ✓ ESF8 Response Teams

¹ It should be noted that the Commonwealth has never experienced a Level 4 Emergency.
Local Board of Health Risk Communication Plan Template

- ✓ EMS CMEDs
- ✓ Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs)
- ✓ Boston Public Health Commission
- ✓ Department of Environmental Protection
- ✓ US General Services Administration
- ✓ US Health and Human Services
- ✓ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- ✓ The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority
- ✓ Infragard Boston (FBI, National Infrastructure Protection Program and private sector partnership)
- ✓ Local Sheriffs
- ✓ Worcester Metropolitan Medical response System

MDPH is currently exploring primary web hosting sites, and will also place a backup site at MEMA headquarters.

HAN users can code alerts into three alert levels: low, medium and high. During a public health emergency (high alert), the HAN has the capability to sequentially alert all contact numbers (including email, phone and pager) for each person with text or voice message. The system will call each number three times unless the person responds. The HAN can also provide confirmation that the person received a message. For routine (low) alerts, the HAN contains news, announcements and educational documents on a range of issues such as SARS and smallpox.

The HAN also provides secure access to:

- A document library including a contact list for the SEOC, MDPH call-down policies, and emergency notification rosters;
- Online discussion forums to provide a means for easy user collaboration and communication; and
- Online training documentation and schedules to ease administrative burden associated with any existing and/or future educational services.

While any user can initiate an alert through the HAN, users have varying access to other users according to their assigned role. For example, only a few users can send an alert to the entire network (i.e., Governor, MDPH Commissioner). Other users, depending on their role (i.e., “fire chief,” “health officer,” etc.) can send alerts to only part of the network. All users can access the HAN directory containing contact information for all users.

MDPH continues to provide training and access to the HAN for additional professionals across the Commonwealth. As a priority, MDPH plans to make ensure that each city and town has at least one person trained from each of the following agencies:

- Public Health
- Emergency Management
- Community Health Centers
- Fire Services
- Emergency Medical Services
- Hospitals
- Police

Once this foundation of users has been established, the training will be available to more users.

MDPH is also exploring other projects to enhance the HAN, including implementing wireless access (i.e., through PDAs), and linking the HAN to other web-based databases (i.e., disease surveillance) to facilitate both regular reporting and to automatically trigger an alert if necessary.

4. Public Health Emergencies in the Commonwealth

In general, there are three broad categories of public health emergencies in the Commonwealth: 1) events occurring at the local level with significant involvement from LBOH; 2) events requiring MDPH response and communication; and 3) major or catastrophic events requiring MEMA activation. In each category, below, are examples of the type of event, key people and organizations involved, your agency's communications role, and the communication mechanisms available for getting messages to appropriate audiences.

Local Public Health Emergency

<i>Overview</i>	An event that originates and is handled by local public health officials with minimal involvement from MDPH
<i>Examples</i>	Foodborne illness outbreak, ongoing West Nile virus education
<i>Key People and Organizations</i>	Local public health department(s), local emergency response personnel, local community service organizations
<i>Local Public Health Communication Role</i>	Lead
<i>Communication Mechanisms</i>	Initiated by local public health department with support from MDPH where necessary. Locals initiate communication with media, local stakeholders and the local community.

State-Level Public Health Emergency

<i>Overview</i>	An event that originates with one or more local public health departments and/or an event that happens in several communities across the state or over a prolonged period requiring a state-level response in addition to/coordination with local response
<i>Examples</i>	First human case of West Nile virus, meningitis case, accidental airline fuel dump over several counties
<i>Key People and Organizations</i>	MDPH Center Director and staff, Public Affairs Director (PAD), Commissioner's office, internal/external stakeholders, local officials
<i>Local Public Health Communication Role</i>	May handle initial communication to partners and the public; work closely with MDPH to support communication as situation evolves

<i>Communication Mechanisms</i>	Initiated by MDPH in coordination with Commissioner and Governor's Office. Designated spokespeople communicate with media, internal/external stakeholders, local community officials, and the general public. Health Alert Network (HAN) may be initiated.
<u>State-Level Public Health Emergency Requiring MEMA activation</u>	
<i>Overview</i>	A major (Level 3) or catastrophic (Level 4) public health emergency requiring MEMA activation
<i>Examples</i>	Smallpox case anywhere in the world; SARS cases in MA; major release of nerve gas or other chemical release
<i>Key People and Organizations</i>	The EOC is staffed with MEMA personnel and members of a variety of State, Federal and volunteer agencies, including MDPH. Together, these cooperating agencies are known as the Massachusetts Emergency Management Team (MEMT). MDPH plays an integral role as a member of the MEMT. The MEMT capabilities are far-reaching, ranging from shelter management to transportation to equipment to communications.
<i>Local Public Health Communication Role</i>	Support MDPH communication; MDPH remains the advisor on issues related to public health, but becomes part of a larger Massachusetts response.
<i>Communication Mechanisms</i>	Throughout duration of activation, the MEMA Public Information Officer (PIO) initiates all communication with the media with support and input from MDPH liaison and in close collaboration with the CEP Director, Commissioner and Governor.